

Broadband more than entertainment

Dearth of technology affects education, public safety, quality of life

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The Daily Mail**

Published: Thursday, April 12, 2012 2:08 AM EDT

CATSKILL — Broadband is not just about personal entertainment.

US Rep. Chris Gibson hosted his second Rural Broadband Symposium at Catskill High School Wednesday. The event, while striking up the conversation about the communities that are underserved, if served at all, with quality broadband, was a step in the right direction, but Gibson said there is still work to do.



Congressman Chris Gibson takes notes during the broadband network symposium held at Catskill High School Wednesday. Photo by Claude Haton

"It was a good day today but much further to go," Gibson said. "What we saw last fall, when we did this up in the North Country, as a direct result of that symposium and having leadership come together, we saw build out."

Areas like Schroon Lake, Fort Ann and Hebron saw, if not build out as a direct result of that symposium, conversations heading in that direction. Towers were even built by AT&T, Gibson said, at a loss to the company, something, he said, they did for the right reasons.

"What we are trying to do is to continue that momentum," Gibson said, "and what you heard today is a testimony about Greenville, which is very positive and I think sets a good model going forward."

Gibson said there is so much work that needs to be done in terms of getting broad band available to those hard to reach places, and that various grant programs are available.

Grants offered by the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Utility Service provides grant options like the Community Connect Grant Program which serves rural communities, like Greenville or Durham, where broadband service least likely to be available, but where it can make a difference in quality of life.

The key to progress, Gibson added was working together at the federal, state and local level while involving the citizens who are organizing in order to make a difference in the rural pockets without service. Mark Evans, the Vice President of State Telephone Company in Coxsackie, said as far as the service goes with State Telephone, 99 percent of the coverage area is able to receive broadband between DSL and copper.

"We have strong fiber-optic in the village of Ravena and the village of Coxsackie," Evans said, "and in the near future we will be offering fiber to the home."

People have wanted that big pipeline of information in their homes, Evans said, and is the focus of his company; however, it becomes a matter of return on investment.

"Unfortunately in a rural county and rural area like we live in," Evans said, "you weigh that when you go to do infrastructure in rural areas, where your houses are a quarter mile and half a mile apart."

Based upon that kind of distance, it becomes very difficult to make a business model.

Evans said he feels fortunate that his territory has coverage, but he is fully aware of the pockets without coverage.

"It really becomes a question of making a business model for it," Evans said, "and being able to run those facilities through those rural areas where they just don't meet the normal models for return on

investment.”

What happens at that point?

That is a situation where municipalities have to get involved and make a decision, Evans said, if there is going to be some type of investment made by government or private entity.

Cofounders of Greene County Citizens for Better Broadband Kathleen Whitley Harm and Rosemary O’Brien said there is a pressing need for broadband in these underserved areas.

“Greene is only 25 miles from the capital and 100 miles from the greatest city in the world,” Harm said, “and you would think we were in a frozen Siberia.”

“We need a task force on the county level,” Harm said. “We are calling all interested stakeholders, we need volunteers, it can’t just be her and I doing this.”

“We have a lot of people who are interested, more than 70 odd people,” O’Brien added, “but they are not workers, necessarily. You are looking at the two workers.”

O’Brien said for the first time she feels that the Greene County Citizens for a Better Broadband has reached critical mass, with legislators nodding yes, the Greene County Economic Development office looking to help. Although there might not currently be the funding to work on the project with a lack of manpower, O’Brien said, economic development officials, with the direction of the county would be willing to work with Harm and O’Brien with the resources at their disposal.

“With the legislators taking notice,” O’Brien said, “I think we have a real shot here.”

Broadband is not just about personal entertainment, the cofounders said, it is about education, 911, public safety, telemedicine education, distance learning.

“So I think all of those things,” O’Brien said, “when they see them and say, ‘Wow, I had no idea,’ I think it helps underscore why it is so important.”

“This is the single most important economic issue,” Harm said, “in this county and in this state. We have an exodus of young people leaving for jobs. We have people leaving in general from New York State, but especially in rural upstate New York. You don’t have accessibility to the Internet. Eighty percent of Fortune 500 companies are requiring only online applications for jobs. If we don’t offer that here, it becomes one more reason to leave, and that is just unacceptable.”

It’s incredible, Harm said, how much leadership means to the issue and Gibson offered his staff and services to put together a forum in Greene County where a plan can be seen through from start to finish.

“What we have done today,” Gibson said, “because our office has been working with Rosemary and Kathleen and then also with [Greenville Town Supervisor] Paul Macko and [Mid-Hudson Cable President] James Reynolds to try to bring people together.”

Hearing the testimony today, Gibson said people get a perspective that broadband is a difficult proposition for a town; certainly in villages, towns and hamlets, who have to be involved.

“But it’s worth exploring, looking at the county as a construct,” Gibson said, “with all the input from villages, hamlets and towns and then overlaying all the providers. Laying that all down and taking a look at the underserved areas.”

The plan, Gibson said, is to find what might make sense to pull all that together and get a model working, then share it with all of the surrounding counties to continue to make progress and build out.

“The people that are here all want to make a difference and that is important,” Gibson said.